

THE FRESNO BEE

Central Valley lawmaker wants to make it easier to get help paying energy bills

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As triple digits temperatures hit the Central Valley, high energy costs are a major concern for low-income Central Valley residents who say they face skyrocketing electricity bills. .

Advocates and local officials are lobbying for Senate Bill 647, the Home Energy Savings Expansion Act, authored by state Sen. Melissa Hurtado, D-Bakersfield, that would benefit low-income families in the Valley. The bill passed the Assembly Appropriations Committee on Friday and awaits a vote next week in the Assembly before end of the legislative session.

“We work with families every day who are spending far too much of their limited income just to keep the lights on towards a running air conditioner during dangerous summer,” said Tom Collishaw, president of Self-Help Enterprises, a community development organization that serves low-income families in nine San Joaquin Valley counties, including Fresno.

Collishaw said SB 647 addresses these challenges by making sure that assistance programs reach the people who need them most.

Current energy assistance programs have complex eligibility requirements and inconsistent rules, making it difficult for families to receive the support they need, leaving vulnerable households exposed to poor indoor air quality and energy inefficiencies.

The bill aims to improve program coordination and directs eligible individuals to additional energy assistance programs that already exist.

SB 647 would require agencies use one standard application that would open the door to multiple forms of assistance for those families in need, with less duplication.

The bill expands eligibility and simplifies access to low-income energy efficiency programs, cuts administrative costs and aims to deliver savings to working families.

“Energy efficiency is not only about lowering the bill, it is about making homes safer and healthier,” Collishaw said.

He said poor insulation, outdated appliances, as well as lack of proper air conditioning systems not only can pose health risks but can be life-threatening during extreme heat.

Advocates said agriculture communities in the valley already face outdoor air pollution from pesticides as well as wildfire smoke.

Visalia Mayor Brett Taylor said rising energy costs may discourage some Valley households from turning on their air conditioning during the summer heat, putting their own life at risk.

“This is the serious reality that a lot of our constituents and a lot of our residents here in the Central Valley are facing,” Taylor said.

Mary Alice Escarsega-Fechner, executive director for Community Services and Employment Training (CSET) in Tulare County, said many of the community residents CSET serves have to fill out multiple paperwork to access services.

“We believe this will help agencies assist more individuals when they are most in need,” Escarsega-Fechner said.

Hurtado said the goal is to have more people benefit from the state’s energy efficiency program to reduce their energy costs.

“We’re trying to make sure that it’s actually working for people and that every dollar that is being used adequately,” Hurtado said. “Ensuring that we can expand it to provide it to more families. When families utilize it, they, there’s a lot of savings in it. A lot of people are not aware of it. A lot of people qualify for it.”

Watch the video at: <https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article311817539.html#storylink=cpy>